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UNCLAS LIMA 004265

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PE](#)

SUBJECT: FINALLY, AN OMBUDSMAN

REF: A. 03 LIMA 6075

[B](#). 03 LIMA 5912

[1](#)1. After almost five years of frustrated attempts to reach a consensus on a candidate, the Peruvian Congress selected former Prime Minister Beatriz Merino on 9/29 to be the country's next Public Ombudsman (Defensora del Pueblo). Merino replaces the "interim" incumbent Walter Alban, who had been the Acting Ombudsman ever since the original occupant of the position, Jorge Santistevan, resigned to run for President in November of 2000. The Congress had taken repeated votes since in an effort to choose a successor, but no candidate had been able to garner the 80 votes (two-thirds of the Congress) necessary to be elected. Merino received 92 votes in favor, two against, and one abstention.

[1](#)2. The reaction to Merino's selection was overwhelmingly positive. She received unequivocal endorsements from both Alban and Santistevan, and from Lourdes Flores, leader of the Unidad Nacional Alliance, who is currently front-runner in the polls for next April's presidential election. The only negative note sounded in media analysis was that Merino's selection was a convenient way for the major political parties to eliminate her as a potential presidential rival -- polling by the University of Lima indicated she had strong potential as an alternative to the perceived candidates of the major parties. In a 9/29 interview with leading daily "El Comercio," Merino firmly discounted the idea that there were any political calculations in her selection, noting that a visit to Sweden several years ago had piqued her interest in the ombudsman's function, which to her represented the "defense of the most vulnerable."

[1](#)3. Biographic Note: Since serving as President of the Council of Ministers for the Toledo Government from July to December of 2003 (Ref A), Merino has worked as a consultant at the World Bank. Merino was born November 15, 1947 and is unmarried. She studied Law and Public Policy at Harvard as a Fulbright Scholar. She also studied at the London School of Economics. Elected to the Peruvian Senate in 1990, she lost her seat in the 1992 Fujimori auto-coup. Merino became a Member of Congress for the FIM Party in 1995, but switched to the Somos Peru Party in 1999, and ran as its vice-presidential candidate in 2000. As a lawyer, she has worked in the areas of commercial law, contracts, taxation, labor law, environmental legislation, acquisitions, mergers, international trade, foreign investment and corporate law.

[1](#)4. COMMENT: Merino is an honest, committed individual who looks to be an excellent choice for this position. Some of her support in the Congress undoubtedly stemmed from a desire to remove her as a potential candidate in 2006; however, after the personal attacks Merino received at the end of her tenure as Prime Minister (Ref B), it is likely she had no intention of returning to electoral politics at this time.  
END COMMENT.

STRUBLE